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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the potential of sociohistorical theory for the study of academic debate. The essay describes sociohistorical theory (noting that it is most often attributed to the work of Lev Vygotsky and that contemporary scholars influenced by it include Jerome Bruner and James Wertsch), the relationship between reason and emotion from a traditional and sociohistoric view, and how sociohistorical theory provides fertile ground for theorizing about debate and critical thinking. Contains 61 references. (NKA)

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A Sociohistorical View of Reason and Emotion in Academic Debate

Phillip Thomson

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This essay examines the potential of sociohistorical theory for the study of academic debate. The essay describes sociohistorical theory, the relationship between reason and emotion from a traditional and sociohistoric view, and how sociohistorical theory provides fertile ground for theorizing about debate and critical thinking.

Sociohistorical theory

Sociohistorical theory is most often attributed to the work of Lev Vygotsky who lived in the Soviet Union in (1896-1934). Vygotsky's main goal was to create a theory of psychology that would be consistent with the basic assumptions of Marx. Vygotsky and Marx held several of the same assumptions.

> First, they both insisted that the analysis of consciousness must start with practical activity. Consciousness is constructed through a subject's interactions with the world and is an attribute of the relationship between subject and object. Second, the basic components of an analysis of practical activity must be interpreted in functional form. Third consciousness changes as the organization of practical activity changes, entailing that an adequate study of consciousness must be historic or genetic. Finally, new levels of the organization of practical activity presuppose different principle of organization and development (Lee, p 67).

From these assumptions Vygotsky and his associates conducted a broad range of investigations examining; the human developmental process, differences between human and animal communication, and enthopsychological

comparisons of the reasoning process.

Research conducted by Vygotsky parallels the work of Piaget and many of the experiments that Vygotsky conducted were similar to those conducted by Piaget. However, the conclusions Vygotsky reached, are quite different than those of Piaget. Vygotsky's conclusions emphasized the role of self-directed speech as a psychological tool. Piaget had dismissed self-directed speech as unimportant. Based on his observations Vygotsky argued that symbolic thought is dialogcal, emerging from interpersonal communication, then becoming intrapersonal in explicit self addressed speech, and then becoming internalized. From this view, speech and symbolic thought are qualitatively the same process. Dialogical thinking is self-addressed speech.

Another important difference is that Vygotsky and his associates concentrated on the social and material relations from which symbolic thought processes emerge. Piaget concentrated on the individual; the sociohistorical view relies on a broader context in which to explain thought. Luria remarked

> In order to describe the highly complex forms of human consciousness one must go beyond the human organism. One must seek the origins of conscious activity and 'categorical' behavior not in the recesses of the human brain or in the depths of the human spirit, but in the external conditions of life. Above all, this means that one must seek these origins in the external processes of social life, in the social and historical forms of human existence (25).

Some noteworthy examples of inquiry guided by sociohistorical theory include the study of Uzbeck peasants Luria conducted in the 1930's.

Researchers asked Uzbeck peasants to perform classification tests and asked them to complete syllogisms. The classification tests sought to discover how the subjects used categories in order to organize experience. When shown a card with a picture a piece of wood, and three tools for woodworking, the peasants were asked which didn't belong. The peasants had difficulty in performing this task. It was difficult to distinguish the raw material (the wood) from the tools because each was used together.

The other experiment consisted in asking peasants to complete a syllogism. For example, when asked, "if precious metals do not rust and gold is a precious mental, does gold rust?" The peasants just shrugged their shoulders. Other questions received similar results; sometimes the respondents would make statements like, "I have no experience with such things".

This research strongly suggests deductive reasoning is not an inherent feature of the human mind and the its' occurrence is related to the types of activities in which a person is engaged. Illiterate peasants used forms of reasoning rooted in everyday activities while; peasants who were literate and had attended school were able to organize their experience using abstract categories.

The line of research conducted by Vygotsky and his associates has only recently caught the attention of academics in the United States. Much of Vygotsky's work was only recently published in the United States. One of the most important and comprehensive works of Vygotsky's, Thought and Language (1934, 1962, 1986) was not published in English until 1962. Another factor

influencing the proliferation of Vygotsky's views was that even within the Soviet Union much of Vygotsky's works was at times suppressed.

Contemporary scholars influenced by sociohistoric theory include Jerome Bruner who wrote the preface for the English publication of Thought and Language (1962). Bruner described sociohistorical theory's focus on "[The] tools and instruments humans employ in the 'enablement of mind,'" and it's presupposition that these tools and instruments, "are essentially cultural tools...transformed historically by the circumstances of social and economic life" (p. 169). James Wertsch is perhaps the leading proponent of sociohistorical theory today. Werscth described Vygotsky as an intellectual "titan" and argued his work remains unique, inspiring, and worth emulating (17). Wertsch edited a volume of contemporary applications of Vygotsky's views (Culture, Communication, and Cognition, 1985). In Voices of the Mind (1991) Werstch argued the human activity is symbolically mediated while being situated and arising from a social and historical context.

The work of Deacon (The Symbolic Animal, 1996) lends the strongest and most recent case for sociohistoric theory. Deacon a neurophysiologist examined several of the central concerns held by Vygotsky and his associates and synthesized several strands of more recent research ranging from; comparisons between human and animal communication, evolutionary psychology, and neurophysiology.

One of Deacon's most important contributions to the development of sociohistorical theory is to combine it with the semiotics of Charles Peirce to

provide an explanation of thought and language that is empirical. Deacon uses Peirce's distinctions between iconic meaning, indexical meaning, and symbolic meaning as a framework to describe and distinguish human mental abilities from those of other animals.

Before considering the role of each of these sign types it is important to consider the differences between Charles Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure who both are recognized as founders of semiotics. The perspectives these scholars held were substantially different and understanding these fundamental differences is useful in providing a rich sociohistorical description of social life.

Saussure emphasized the structure of language and idealized the langue, a pure language; and the parole, language in use. Additionally, Saussure understood meaning as one to one mapping between a signifier and it's signified. Sausserean semiotics has been central to Structuralist theories of human activity. Sheriff described

> In 1945 Ernst Cassier said that the rise of the new science of linguistics "may well be compared to the new science of Gallileo which in the seventeenth century changed our whole concept of the physical world. In that same year the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss said that Saussurean linguistics "ought to play the same liberating role for the social sciences that nuclear physics, for example, played for the exact sciences (p. xv).

Many scholars now reject the Saussurean view. Derrida for example, demonstrated that there could be no central point of reference for the code systems we use in the construction of meaning. Sheriff explained Derrida's

conclusion as, "all meaning is supplementary, an ideality exterior to the process of language" (p. 53).

Sheriff argued that Peirce's theory of signs offers a way to overcome the shortcomings of structuralism. Sheriff explained that Peirce's "doctrine of signs" is able to clarify many important issues raised by structuralist theories. It also allows semioticians, "to see beyond the limitations set by Saussure's analysis of the sign" (Sheriff, p. 54)

Deacon described the empirical shortcomings of the Saussurean view and found shortcomings similar to Sheriff. The Saussurean view "collapses a multileveled relationship into a simple mapping relationship" (70). He then persuasively suggested that a Peircian view more accurately reflect empirical data regarding human cognition and language use. Deacon argued the views of Peirce are important to consider, Peirce

> rephrased the problem of mind in terms of communication, essentially arguing that all forms of thought (ideas) are essentially communication (transmission of signs), organized by a fundamental logic (or semiotic, as he called it) that is not fundamentally different for communication processes inside or outside of the brain" (70).

The distinction between icon, index, and symbol is fundamental to Peircian semiotics and served as a guide for Deacon who investigated the neourophysiological basis of each. Icons are signs that represent something else; they share some physical resemblance with the object being represented. Indices have some relationship with what the represent. The relationship could

be causal, "where's there is smoke there is fire." A symbol has an arbitrary relationship with what it represents. Based on his analysis of a broad range of empirical data Deacon reaches a conclusion remarkably similar to Vygotsky, the ability to use symbols is what truly distinguishes human intelligence from animal intelligence.

Reason and Emotion

For the most part rationality and logic have been the favored means advocated for the fixing of belief[1]. Enlightenment scientists felt analytic logic was governed the behavior of the universe and the metaphor of a giant clockworks was frequently used by scholars of the time to describe the universe. William James explained that when the scientists of the Enlightenment began systematic investigations of natural phenomena they felt that God's mind reverberated in syllogisms.

Because the universe was seen as logical, human's abilities to use analysis was given particular privilege. In Discourse on the Rightly Conducting the Reason and Seeking Truth in the Sciences, Descartes distinguished mind from body

> I thence concluded that I was substance whose whole essence or nature consists only in thinking, and which, that it may exist, has need of no place, nor is dependent on any material thing; so that "I," that is to say, the mind by which I am what I am, is wholly distinct from the body....

He attributed the rational quality of mind to a somewhat mystical origin.

Descartes' view echoed Plato's world of essences, he frequently used the ancient metaphor of the 'natural light' or 'light of reason' to convey the notion that fundamental intuitions of the intellect are inherently reliable (Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, xxxx?, p.195).

From the perspective that geometrical perfection exists on some essential plane of reality, data a person might gain through sensation was suspect. Unger describes the predicament, one "knows things as they appear to it through sensation rather than as they really are. Perfect certainty, therefore can only be achieved in the study of logic and mathematics" (1986, p. 37).

Given this view the devaluation of emotion is not surprising. Central to the Enlightenment view of the mind was the notion that thought separate is from emotion. Toulmin argued that during the Enlightenment

> Calculation was enthroned as the distinctive virtue of the human reason; and the life of the emotions was repudiated, as distracting one from the demands of clear-headed deliberation (Toulmin, p. 134).

Furthermore

> Descartes exalted a capacity for formal rationality and logical calculation as the supremely mental thing in human nature, at the expense of emotional experience, which is a regrettable by-product of our bodily nature's (p. 148).

The emphasis on analytic or deductive rationality diminished

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[1] The "belief fixation process" is the subject of one Peirce's most important essays.

somewhat in the late 1700's and 1800's as Romantic views of human nature became popular, and then re-emerged in the 20th century

> the ideas of strict "rationality" modeled on formal logic, and of a universal "method" for developing new ideas in any field of natural science, were adopted in the 1920s and 1930s with *even greater* enthusiasm, and in even more extreme form, than had been the case in the mid-17th century (Toulmin, p. 159).

Mathematics became increasingly important to philosophers. Examples include the work of George Boole (1815-1864), Gottlob Frege (1848-1925), and Rudolf Carnap (1891-1970) whose work amongst others collectively "trumped" the earlier rationalists "with spades" (Toulmin, p. 159). In a move prompted the philosopher Frege amongst others

> Logic underwent a brilliant development during the last century when, abandoning the old formulas, it set out to analyze the methods of proof effectively used by mathematician. Modern formal logic became in this way the study of the methods of demonstration used in the mathematical sciences . . . (Perelman and Olbrecths-Tyteca, 1969, p. 10).

It from this legacy that the contemporary critical thinking movement has its roots.

Critical Thinking

Traditional approaches to critical thinking are criticized as too reliant on a rationality that favors deductive methods for belief fixation. For most of these critics, current conceptions of critical thinking are not very far removed from the rationality of the Enlightenment. Kerry Walters argued

> the explosion of interest in critical thinking that spread across the academy in the last twenty years, focusing

> squarely and almost exclusively as it does on the canon of logical analysis operates from an orientation earlier categorized as logicistic (p. 4).

Walters used the term logicism to describe the traditional approach to critical thinking. Logicism being

> the unwarranted assumption that good thinking is reducible to logical thinking. A logicistic approach to critical thinking conveys the message to students that thinking is legitimate only when it conforms today procedures of informal (or to a lesser extent, formal) logic and that the good thinker necessarily aims for styles of examination and appraisal that are analytical, abstract, universal, and objective (p. 2).

Weinstein also argued critical thinking advocates, for the most part, "assume procedures and principles of reasoning and logic that transcend the particularity of forms of discourse" (1993, p. 101).

Examples of scholars who equate of critical thinking with deductive rationality include Mullen who explained that uncritical thinking is when we, "shut off our brains and engage in soft thinking" (1995, p. 2). She explained, soft thinking is thinking that lacks, clarity and logical force" (p.2). The idea of shutting off our brains and letting thoughts from other sources evokes the image that there are other, bodily influences on belief fixation.

Another example of a logistic view of critical thinking is Seigal. A reason for this identification is Seigal's claim that, "A deductively valid formal argument can be seen as providing a paradigm of good argumentation" (1988, p. 26). Seigal denies the claim that analytic logic and critical thinking are equivalent but

statements like the above contribute to readings of his work that assume he does not. Other factors that contribute to this view are his suggestions that an enlightenment narrative should be a guide to contemporary discussions of critical thinking.

Emotion in traditional critical thinking

Many advocates of the traditional notion of critical thinking either ignore or reject altogether the role that emotion should play in critical thinking. In reference to those who would reject reliance on emotion Walters used an extended analogy to criticize and describe the current standing of emotion in logicistic approaches to critical thinking. Walters explained

> The disturbing thing about this educational campaigning of critical thinking is that it assumes the same model of rationality accepted by Spock and his fellow Vulcans. From an epistemological perspective it argues that thinking is legitimate -- that is, rational -- if and only if it is logical.

The diminution of emotion in critical thinking literature is seen in Walton's observation that much of the literature surrounding fallacies also warns against reliance on emotions. Appeals to emotion are

> distrusted and even labeled categorically as logical fallacies. There is a common tendency to contrast, impartial reason" with the passions" and to distrust the latter in reasoned arguments (p. 82).

He continued

> this tendency is often affirmed in logic texts where appeals to emotion have been treated as inherently illogical and subject to strong censure (Walton, p. 83).

Walton also equated emotion with inherently weak support for arguments (p. 83).

However, after pointing out this tendency, Walton argued for the importance of emotion in the making of some decisions. He cited our "decent instincts" as sometimes being the best reasons (p. 83). The use of the term instinct differentiates emotion from thought, another example of this differentiation is when he characterized emotion as "unthinking reaction" (p. 83). The description of emotion as distinct from thought is highly suggestive of the traditional model of the mind. In the Platonic model, important inspiration and guidance well up from the depths of a divinely inspired irrationality, Walton used the terms "deep emotional wellsprings" or "gut feelings" to describe to source of emotions.

Debate and Critical Thinking

Debate as an academic activity, used in the classroom and in intercollegiate competitions, has long been advocated as a means to teach students critical thinking. Most debate and argument textbooks make the claim that learning about debate and argumentation teach critical thinking. Freely stated, "Debate today, as it has been since classical times, is one of the methods of learning and applying the principles of critical thinking" (1990, p.1). Other argument and debate textbooks include references to critical thinking in their titles.

The recognition that argument and debate are a means for learning critical thinking skills is reflected in the in the curricular choices made by some college and universities. At several institutions, a course in argument and debate can be used to fulfill core requirements for critical thinking.

Research has demonstrated that debating can improve a students score on a written measure of critical thinking skills. In 1943, Howell found that debate experience could enhance performance on the Watson-Glaser critical thinking test. This finding was also duplicated by Brembeck (1949), Williams (1951), Jackson (1961), Colbert (1987), and Whalen (1991) who also used the Watson-Glaser test. A main shortcoming of this research is that it does not provide any support for the claim that debate is particularly suited for teaching critical thinking.

The failure to find compelling results regarding critical thinking and debate is largely a function of the way critical thinking becomes operational defined by using the Watson-Glaser test as a measure for it. When a researcher defines critical thinking as what the Watson-Glaser test measures, he/she adopts a definitely logocentric definition of what critical thinking is.

The shortcomings of adopting a logocentric view is that emotions are ruled out categorically as having a role to play in belief fixation. As long as researchers of argument and debate continue to hold on to a logocentric view of critical thinking important arguments that justify the teaching argument and debate will be neglected. One such argument is the potential for debate to facilitate empathetic reasoning processes. Before considering the hypothesis

that debate teaches empathy as a part of critical thinking, some general comments regarding empathy and how it might be described from a sociohistorical perspective will be examined.

Empathy

Before considering the specific emotion of empathy a brief description of what how emotions are decried using sociohistorical theory is useful. McCrone, provided such a description, "[t]he higher feelings of humans are neither innate nor irrational". He continued, "an emotion like jealousy is socially constructed -- a way of looking at the world that makes social sense" (249). Emotions, when viewed sociohistorically contain both affective and cognitive components, most importantly they are substantially influenced by the context in which they occur. McCrone continued, "[l]ike the title of a play, an emotion word has to stand for a theme, a script, a cast of actors, and often even stage directions and dialogue to boot" (251).

Researchers have examined empathy since Titchner coined the term in 1909 explaining that is the process of identification with objects, when experiencing empathy a person was "reading or feeling ourselves into them" (qtd by Duan and Hill, 1996, p. 261). Since then the term has been more often used as describing an experience where a person takes the perspective and experiences some feelings that are similar to those felt by another person.

Scholars have attached tremendous significance to empathy, Hoffman argued

> I think it is significant that a person who is feeling

> good can quickly shift to feeling sad when they observe someone in danger, pain, or economic deprivation. Indeed I believe this most human capacity for empathetic distress may provide the affective and motivational base for moral development and just behavior and thus be a major cohesive force or glue in society (p. 151).

Others have made similar claims as observed by Eisenberg and Fabes, who found that empathy is frequently linked with altruistic behaviors (1990, p. 131).

Research has tended to confirm the linkage between empathy and prosocial behavior. One example is the work of Krebs (1975) who argued that people are able to act altruistically because people are able to empathize (p. 1145). His research also suggested that people who experienced the strongest empathetic reactions were the people who were most willing to sacrifice self interest in order to help another (p. 1145). The work of Hoffman also tends to confirm this linkage (Hoffman, 1982, 1984, and 1990). In 1988, Oliner and Oliner found that empathy was one the motives that led "ordinary men and women to risk their lives on the behalf of others" in Nazi, Germany.[2]

Claims made regarding critical thinking and empathy

Given common sense understandings about the importance of empathy and the suggestive research described above it should not be surprising that many advocates of critical thinking argue that empathy has an important role to play in the belief fixation process. Both the critics and advocates of logocistic approaches to critical thinking argue that empathy is important.

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[2] This reserch is problematic. see Eisenburg and Fabes, 1990.

Walters emphasized empathy as contributing to critical thinking because it is nonanalytic and intuitive (p. 11). Clinchy argued empathy was important to critical thinking because to empathize, one feels with and thinks with another person, it gives a person a sense of connectedness (p.39). Paul argued that empathy is a rational passion (p. 551) and Seigal explained

> It is a commonplace that a major goal of moral education is the enhancement of moral sensitivity and empathy, so as to foster the appreciation of moral reasons. Seeing a considerations a powerful reason often depends on a being able to empathize with those in the moral situation at hand, or on being aware and sensitive to the legitimate interests and needs of moral agents. Being insensitive thus harms one's ability to grasp, and participate in morally charged situations (p. 51).

Gallo argued that empathy should be considered an essential component of critical thinking (p. 41). Gallo provided a rich description of how empathy could enhances to critical thinking. Empathy, "can predispose an individual to more effective reasoning by increasing one's engagement with the issue and one's motivation for producing a fair judgment" (p. 49).

Debate as a means to facilitate empathy

A strong but overlooked argument that debate teaches critical thinking is that debating facilitates empathetic reasoning. Evidence regarding this claim is highly suggestive and should be noted by argument scholars. There is both anecdotal and empirical support for this claim which argument scholars could build on in developing questions regarding debate and empathy.

Anecdotal evidence, that might sound familiar to many who have taught or

coached debate, is described by Nussbaum

> I talk about a student who was in a required philosophy course at his college, it was a business college, and he didn't know before that time that you could argue on behalf of a position you don't hold yourself. And it was a real revelation to him. And he said, now, when he has a political argument with his friends, he thinks about it completely differently; that he tries to understand the opinions on both sides.

Schossman (1996) provides additional anecdotal evidence when she claims, "It is precisely because I have seen empathy taught to anyone that I want a politics of meaning to succeed". Empirical support comes from other sources such as Macrae and Milne (1992) who found that empathy intensifies the effects of counterfactual alternatives.

Deacon reached conclusions that should lend support to researchers interested in the relationship between debate and empathy.

> The symbolic construction of others' plausible emotional states, and their likely emotional responses to our further actions, are analogous to a whole new sensory modality feeding into our ancient social-emotional response systems. This ability to let our emotions be activated by the virtual experiences constructed with the aid of symbols probably makes us the only animal where there can be a genuine conflict of simultaneous emotional states (p. 431).

Deacon bases his above conclusion on many assumptions he shares with Vygotsky.

When viewed from a sociohistorical perspective debate is a process thought should teach students to both learn and appreciate empathetic reasoning.

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